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EVALUATING HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH PROGRAMS.

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A STUDY OF 168 AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS WHICH ACHIEVE IMPORTANT RESULTS IN ENGLISH WAS CONDUCTED BY FACULTY MEMBERS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS ENGLISH AND EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS THROUGH QUESTIONNAIRES, INTERVIEWS, AND OBSERVATIONS. THIS PRELIMINARY REPORT CONSIDERS FINDINGS OF THE STUDY RELEVANT TO (1) THE LEADERSHIP AND STAFFING OF ENGLISH PROGRAMS, (2) THE NATURE OF THE CURRICULA FOR LITERATURE, COMPOSITION, SPEECH, AND READING, (3) DESIRABLE CONDITIONS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH, AND (4) METHODS OF EVALUATING ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE NORTH CENTRAL ASSOCIATION QUARTERLY," VOL. 40 (WINTER 1966), 247-254. (SEE ALSO ED 010 163 FOR THE COMPLETE REPORT.) (DL)

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Evaluating High School English Programs

AT NO other time during the last half-century has the teaching of high school English been so critically studied as during the past five years. The signs are everywhere apparent: the emergence of fifteen curriculum study centers in English each developing model programs for high school teaching (6); the work of the Commission on English of the College Entrance Examination Board (4); the large scale support for research in the teaching of English made available through the Program in English of the U. S. Office of Education (3, 11); and the beginning last year of an annual summer institute program, supported by the National Defense Education Act and promising to introduce more than 10,000 teachers of English annually to new content and new approaches.

These developments testify to the fact that in English the log jam between research and practice, between the work of our scholars and the work of our teachers, is at last beginning to clear. If the teaching of English has long suffered from neglect, it is now threatened with overconcern. Of all the characteristics which today's high school departments of English should most clearly reflect, concern of such scholarly and professional developments should certainly be foremost. In the general awareness of the principal, in the knowledge of the department chairman, in the willingness of the teachers to consider intelligent change, in the availability of new instructional materials—in all of these ways a school indicates its concern with current developments, and when the developments promise as much as do the changes in English today, such awareness reflects to a considerable degree the latent strength of any English program. Those who evaluate programs in English during the next few years would do well to begin by considering a school's commitment toward assessing current trends.

During the past three years, faculty members of the University of Illinois have studied in detail 168 high school English programs that were reported to be achieving important results in English. Co-sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English and supported by the United States Office of Education, the project known as the National Study of High School English Programs has attempted to identify characteristics of these outstanding programs through questionnaires, interviews, and periods of observation by professors of English and education.

The major findings of the study, viewed in relation to other scholarly and professional developments, offer a unique touchstone for assessing English programs today. The discussion in this article is limited to considering the leadership and staffing of English programs, the nature of the curriculum, the conditions desirable for teaching English today, and ways of gathering information about English departments.

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Leadership and Staffing

Perhaps the most important single characteristic of a strong English program is the quality of leadership by the principal and the department chairman. In better schools the two establish harmonious rapport—the principal at all times demonstrating his personal concern and support for humanistic and intellectual matters; the chairman, given adequate time, status, and responsibility, providing vigorous intellectual leadership.

The principal, who attends the greatest number of professional conferences and meetings, can often be the first to introduce ideas concerning experimental patterns of instruction and curricular organization. At such professional meetings, the principal devotes some of his time to discussions of new developments in subject areas, and he relays these to the respective departments for their careful consideration.

In most good departments, the chairman concerns himself not only with "servicing" his fellow teachers (passing out books, filling out forms, etc.), but by leading his colleagues in curriculum development, by assisting in programing and assigning teachers to classes, by engaging in classroom supervision of teachers, and by conferring with individuals. In view of the neglect of classroom supervision in many schools, too much emphasis cannot be placed on the contribution which a subject specialist like the English chairman can make.

Anyone who has visited British schools knows how completely the quality of an educational program can depend on such leadership. As the individual who best knows the teacher and the subject, the chairman is in a unique position to help both beginning and experienced colleagues; given assigned time for his departmental responsibilities, he can be continually available for conferences. In the better English programs of the country, he is a dynamic leader—neither the automatic, tyrannical master who makes decisions without consulting his teachers nor the servile departmental service man with neither time nor authority for his responsibilities (10).

The importance of the academic and professional preparation of the English faculty cannot be underestimated. With the complexity of modern language studies, assigned teachers of English require an undergraduate major in English or its equivalent. (In schools studied by the National Study of High School English Programs, more than 50 percent of the teachers hold Master's degrees as well.) But mere reliance on college degrees of whatever kind offers no positive assurance of qualification. More than half of today's majors in English still lack courses in the English language, in advanced composition, and in the teaching of reading. Do employing officials consider the quality, depth, and breadth of a teacher's preparation in English? Or merely his final credentials? In the better programs visited in the National Study, either school principals or department chairmen (often both) evaluated transcripts and interviewed applicants to assess their special preparation.

In view of the diverse backgrounds required for different assignments in teaching English, involving a subject specialist in the screening process seems highly desirable. In schools where applicants are selected by the general personnel officers of a district and assigned willy-nilly to schools without consultation with principal or department chairman, the teaching of English obviously encounters difficulties. Indeed in some large districts, teachers are reported to have appeared in their schools for the first time on opening day, their unique abilities and personal competence unknown to the administrator and the chairman who had necessarily assigned them to classes before they had even arrived.

An English department requires balance. Beyond the basic preparation required of all teachers of English, teachers will develop specialities. In a strong department where diverse talents are carefully nurtured, surely some teachers

should have completed advanced work in language beyond the introductory courses; others should be pursuing specialized interests in rhetoric and reading; a few may be engaged in advanced studies in literary criticism. By encouraging such specialities a department can keep itself informed about several fields. Where no thought is given to such differences, departments can become too parochial and, not infrequently, limited in their interests to one or two particular kinds of literary studies. Indeed, balance in staff preparation is so important that the best schools do not set inservice requirements for additional course work on a carte blanche basis. Acceptability of additional credits hinges in part on the genuine contribution particular courses are likely to make to the individual teacher's background and to the range of competencies in the department.

Provision for inservice education is particularly important during these years of change. According to Charles Ferguson, Director of the Center for Applied Linguistics, more has been learned about the nature of language and how it is learned in the past five years than in the preceding 100 years. How many teachers in the department completed all their advanced study in language more than five years ago? How long has it been since teachers attended summer or inservice courses in English? How many have participated in summer NDEA institutes? What books have recently been studied and discussed in departmental meetings? Are workshops and institutes organized by the school district excessively general in character? Or do English teachers have frequent occasion to meet with an outside consultant in English? (More than half of the American secondary teachers claim they have little opportunity to meet with college teachers of English. Looking at how any school maintains relations with institutions above and below its own grade levels will yield important insights into the nature of supervision and curriculum development.) Such questions are important to consider with reference to the program, too, for with the swiftness of change in English studies, a teacher without some recent contact with professional and scholarly developments in language, literature, and composition is a teacher ill prepared to cope with modern content and approaches in English.

A truly outstanding department of English includes several vital teacher-leaders. Even the best departments may have some minimally competent teachers who will rise only to the level of the material or the climate that surrounds them. But they *will* rise. Almost always, the National Study discovered a strong department is built around a nucleus of exciting teacher-leaders who serve as catalysts for the rest, individuals who with their vitality, exuberance, and interest establish a standard for teaching and set a pace that the others try to emulate.

Balance in Curriculum

Surely a curricular guide is needed to provide a framework for teaching, but the importance of lengthy printed documents may be overstressed. Not always has the Study found a close correlation between the existence of such detailed curriculum guides and the quality of instruction; sometimes any real connection between ambitious curriculum guides and real programs is impossible to establish. Indeed, the crucial factor here is less the guide itself than the involvement of the teachers in curriculum planning. As the Commission on English of the Entrance Examination Board recommends, the actual curriculum must result from a consensus of teachers in each individual school; it should not be imposed by any other agency at the district, state, or national level; nor should it be circumscribed by the limits of the textbooks themselves. Indeed, in too many schools textbooks and the teaching programs seem almost synonymous (10).

Literature

In literature, a program based on contemporary thinking may be organized in several ways—around themes, ideas, individual texts, even chronology or indi-

vidual authors. But its characteristics are fairly clear. It will be a program stressing the reading of a limited number of complete literary texts in considerable depth, rather than a program for covering a vast field of study, such as the ill-designed historical surveys so characteristic of English programs two or three decades ago. More and more, good teachers are moving away from sole reliance on a single comprehensive anthology. The snippets, fragments, and lengthy introductions of yesteryear are disappearing. Even in courses organized chronologically, good teachers focus on reading a few great books or great authors, rather than on covering all authors and all times.

And today teachers are trying to stress approaches to reading literature—the analytical skills involved, the understanding of imagery, metaphor, and symbol. *Our Town* is less important as an end in itself than as a vehicle to learn how to read and understand modern plays. In the better programs, too, stress is placed on the individual reading of many good books, and ways are developed for bringing these books into the classroom, organizing room libraries, and giving students some school time during which to read. One recent study revealed that a program of wide reading in which an hour or two of classroom reading was provided each week increased the average number of books read per semester from about seven or eight per pupil to more than twenty-five (2). Paperback book stores, widespread use of supplementary novels, group readings in the classroom, a well-stocked library open during hours when students can browse—these are important.

It is not just the students who are caught up with reading in such a climate. Carrying heavy loads and surrounded by little more than textbooks, teachers of English themselves can lose the habit of wide independent reading. One insightful administrator has suggested a "loaded" question he would put to English departments: "Of the books written within the last five years, which five would you recommend that we add to the English program?" If the response is pained silence, it reflects not only on the department, but on the intellectually impoverished surroundings within which they work. The question might in fact be a stimulus to a department to begin to reconsider priorities.

Composition

In composition, writing must be taught; it cannot merely be provided. In too many schools today, teachers fail to sense the distinction. It is well to have students write each week, but if such exercises are unmotivated, mechanical, and unrelated to a continuing dialogue of ideas in language and literature, then such activity is self-defeating. Better to have students write only every two weeks; yet have each experience carefully planned.

What occurs before writing takes place in the classroom may be as important as what happens after the paper is handed in to the teacher. Good writing stems from good thinking—from a reservoir of ideas evaluated by the individual writer. A sound writing program is built not only on much writing but on wide and critical reading, carefully planned discussion, and sequential instruction in rhetorical matters, such as the organization and development of ideas and the ways of achieving greater clarity and effectiveness of expression. Most teachers use no book in providing such instruction, but they do require some guidelines. Without them, instruction is spasmodic and uncertain.

A hasty check of sample compositions corrected by teachers is a salutary experience for anyone evaluating an English program. Are cumulative files of student compositions maintained in every classroom? Are students encouraged to rewrite certain papers after considering the teacher's criticism? Do teachers and students occasionally review compositions written over a period of several months to analyze general progress and consider the need of instruction? And what of annotations on the papers themselves? Even in

the better schools visited in the National Study, observers reported theme annotations variously accomplished. But observers and students alike believe that the most helpful comments respond to the ideas themselves and to the development of ideas in each paper. Comments on papers limited to minor errors in usage and structure and to technical problems in spelling and punctuation are of limited value. Such matters should by no means be ignored, but they should be subservient to concern for ideas.

Speech

Literature, language, and composition are the essentials of the English programs, but other aspects require some attention. Is care being taken to provide thoughtful attention to speech—not to declamation and platform performance for most students, but to discussion of ideas and to oral interpretation? The elective speech course seldom provides opportunity for more than 20 percent of the pupils in any school. Where do the other 80 percent receive instruction? (And if English teachers plead that they are not prepared to teach speech, what are they doing to overcome this deficiency in their background?)

Reading

The teaching of reading is important too, especially in comprehensive schools enrolling a great variety of pupils. Observers in the National Study were not particularly impressed with special reading teachers, and most found special reading programs to be unrelated to the program in English and tending to divorce the "how" of reading from both the "what" and the "why." What seems important is that a department of English think through its purposes for teaching reading skills in relation to the nature of its students. Those in the lower levels will require special instruction in fundamental processes; those in advanced classes need help in perfecting mature skills involved in critical reading. Work in any English class should not be so oriented to teaching a body of "content," whether literary, linguistic, or rhetorical, that it neglects the processes by which students learn to master content. Only if our English programs develop in all pupils the needed abilities to pursue additional studies in English can programs be said to be successful.

In any assessment of an English program, some attention must be directed toward differentiated planning for separate groups of students. Strong as are many programs in English for college-preparatory students, the programs for the less able sometimes receive scant attention. Indeed, the fundamental question which an outside observer needs to ask about any English program for the slow, the disadvantaged, the lower tracks, is not whether it is successful in all respects, but whether it has received adequate attention at all.

One of the disturbing discoveries of the National Study was that the lower tracks —indeed, programs for as many as the middle 50 percent of our pupils—have received little thoughtful attention. With so many schools encountering difficulties in translating programs for such students into action, it may be too much to expect fully successful curriculums for some years. But it is surely not too much to expect any department to have addressed itself to the problem; to have some of the stronger teachers and newer learning materials available for such pupils; to make an attempt to introduce some literary materials; to engage such pupils in some experiences in thinking, not merely in mechanical exercises and isolated drills. Too many programs for the less able do not reveal these characteristics, but there is no reason why they should not.

Standards for the Department

What of staffing, teaching conditions, and required equipment? Recognizing the importance of such problems, the National Study called two conferences of selected English chairmen to formulate a statement of basic requirements for

modern English programs. This statement has been published by the National Council of Teachers of English (10). An overview of the recommendations suggests perhaps the goals toward which schools may be working in teaching conditions, rather than standards which may be characteristic of a great many programs:

a. *Department Chairman*: The chairman should be released one period for supervisory responsibilities for every five full-time teachers, in addition to a general preparation period. But regardless of the size of the department, he should teach at least one class. In very large departments, the appointment of grade level chairmen, each with a period of released time for meeting with the chairman, will provide helpful supplementary leadership.

b. *Clerical Assistance*: The department chairman requires at least a half-time typist and clerk to maintain departmental records and manage a departmental English Center. Discovering, also, that the average English teacher spends three or four hours weekly in routine clerical work, the staff of the study recommends one full-time typist and clerk for at least every fifteen English teachers.

c. *Departmental Center*: An English Center, organized by the chairman but available to all teachers, should contain copies of sample textbooks and supplementary books; resource books for teacher use in preparing lessons; sample units, lessons, tests, and instructional aids; a departmental collection of spoken arts recordings; and supplementary instructional aids that cannot be provided in individual classrooms (motion picture projector, etc.). One unexpected discovery in the National Study was that the use of instructional aids by teachers of English appears to vary inversely with the distance of such aids from the classroom. In large schools, the establishment of schoolwide instructional materials centers with the inevitable complications in ordering and securing equipment discourages widespread use of materials by teachers of English. Hence, locating such equipment in departmental centers seems a desirable compromise. Above all, the center should be sufficiently large and inviting to encourage teachers of English to work there and to converse informally about professional matters. Such informal communication is invaluable but seems not to happen in large schoolwide faculty workrooms, in lunchrooms, or in smoking lounges which seem to separate men and women.

d. *Classroom Equipment*: As much as special equipment is needed to teach science or mathematics, appropriate equipment is necessary in a modern English classroom. In addition to book cases, magazine racks, and files, the department chairmen at two national conferences asked for a classroom book collection of approximately 500 appropriate titles, many of them paperbacks so as to reduce costs, encourage greater pupil reading, and relieve the problem of maintaining daily records of their circulation. Far from discouraging the use of the central library, such classroom collections, when well managed, seem to encourage wider reading and promote library use.

Certain electronic equipment is dedesirable and necessary. An overhead projector and a screen are necessary, especially when teachers are preparing lessons outside of the classroom and are thus not able to place material on chalk boards for ensuing class periods. A record player and a tape recorder seem important too, perhaps provided through a self-contained audiovisual unit complete with earphones for classroom use by groups and individuals. Many teachers also prefer portable furniture, either chair desks or small tables. But merely providing such equipment is insufficient if teachers do not learn to use it. Once equipment is supplied the department chairman, principal, and curriculum director need to provide programs of inservice education.

Ideally every teacher of English would like his own room; in practice such assignment is not possible if the number of classes assigned per teacher approaches the rather uniform recommendations by

all main groups that have carefully studied the problems involved in teaching of English. (See below.) Still care needs to be exercised that rooms are not assigned indiscriminately, so teachers like students must chase from room to room and have little opportunity to assemble materials and thoughts between each hourly lesson. Ideally, perhaps, three teachers might be assigned to two rooms and also share a small office in between.

e. *Teaching Load*: Every authoritative study of English teaching for the past decade has agreed on the same maximum goal—not more than four classes of English and not more than 100 students for every teacher of English. The figure is more symbolic than not, the exigencies of each program inevitably requiring local variation. Such a standard should not be permitted to discourage experimentation with large group instruction on the one hand or with tutorial instruction and independent study on the other, but neither should such experimentation be used to justify overloading teachers. Those responsible for providing informed guidance in writing and reading cannot easily maintain reasonable quality if loads exceed more than 100 pupils daily. About one-third of the teachers in schools assessed by the National Study were assigned no more than four classes; about half met fewer than 125 pupils daily; and most schools were working intensively to reduce loads still further.

Present measures of skill in composition are so imprecise that researchers have yet to demonstrate empirically that reduction in the class load of the English teacher makes a significant difference. (Half of the studies do report pupil improvement but half show "no significant difference.") Still the recommendations of specialists are overwhelming. From the National Council of Teachers of English, from James B. Conant's *American High School Today*, from the College Board's Commission on English, from the Presidential Commission on National Goals, from the National Study of High School English Programs—the load of the typical teacher of English should be not more than four classes and not more than 100 students (or its equivalent). No teacher or specialist well informed about the requirements of English instruction would disagree in principle.

Methods of Evaluation

The experience of observers for the National Study of High School English Programs suggests some approaches to assessing programs in English which may be useful to other observers. Checklists for evaluating instruction, such as the *Evaluative Criteria* of the National Study of Secondary School Evaluation or the *Check List* provided by the National Council of Teachers of English (3) may prove useful guides, but they tend to equate matters of great importance with many which are of lesser importance or even inconsequential. They need to be carefully weighted in advance by the evaluation team. The reading of curriculum guides on courses of study in advance of visitation helps to provide perspective. So will interviews with principals and department chairmen, providing insight into the way in which these individuals perceive their roles and into their professional attitudes toward English.

Of great significance is conducting a sampling of classroom teaching, perhaps guided by a check list directing attention to the content of lessons, the methodology, and the use of equipment. Of 32,580 minutes observed during the National Study, observers reported some 52.2 percent of the class time spent on literature, 15.7 percent on composition, and 13.5 percent on language, proportions which may be less unbalanced than they sound if much of the work on literature is related to writing and composing.

What seems particularly important is the relationship between what a department says and what it does—between the percentage of time it thinks it is spending on composition and the time it is actually spending. Only by observing lessons can

such critical discrepancies be identified. Similarly, such observation can indicate whether all classroom approaches to learning are receiving proper emphasis—group discussion, Socratic questioning, audiovisual techniques, independent study, lecture, and class discussion.

Interviews with selected individual English teachers will reveal important insights. So also will talks with the school librarians (about book selection) and with an occasional counselor (about programing). A group interview with the entire English department will often reveal the existence or absence of rapport within a department, the level of sophistication about English matters, and the extent to which teachers feel free to disagree about professional matters.

Often overlooked as sources of information are students and their examinations. In the National Study twelfth grade groups of students, usually from college-preparatory sections, proved to be surprisingly articulate in analyzing their own experiences in English. Even though they lack total perspective on overall aims and goals, they are frequently aware of the significance of particular experiences.

A sampling of midsemester and end-of-the-year examinations tells accurately what a department sees as important, or what students conclude is important. Are all goals to which the department subscribes reflected in these examinations? Or do only certain aspects of English receive attention? In more than a few departments in which well over half of the teaching time was devoted to literature, examinations reviewed by observers in the Study were devoted almost exclusively to grammar and usage. One wonders how students in such schools react to being taught one component of English and being tested on another!

These, then, are some of the observations in the assessment of English programs emerging from the National Study. The full report to be published by the National Council of Teachers of English late in 1966 will document these observations and provide many additional conclusions. This preliminary report suggests some of the conclusions which may prove significant to consider in any thorough analysis of a high school English program.

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